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# Mississippi Pirates

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## Mississippi Pirates

The McGregor *North Iowa Times* had "the gratification of announcing . . . the rescue of a large amount of merchandise" and the break-up of "a system of thieving" on the upper Mississippi in the spring of 1858. For more than a year an old building on the west bank of the river, opposite the upper Prairie du Chien ferry, had been "the rendezvous of the robbers." From this base they ventured as far north as La Crosse, Wisconsin, in quest of booty. When sufficient loot had been accumulated, cargoes were loaded for sale down the river. Indeed, it was a carpenter, who had been employed to repair a boat for just such a voyage, who revealed their hideout and operations, following a violent quarrel about his wages.

On a Friday morning, late in April, constables Kee and Brown from McGregor, together with Sanford L. Peck and several citizens, acted on the carpenter's tip and started in search of the "pirates". They steered their skiff toward Big Island, nearly opposite Wyalusing. Since the river was high, much of the island was submerged and accessible by boat. The party could, there-



fore, make a "thorough reconnoiter" and soon discovered a camp on the island occupied by George Sciville, another man, and a nine-year-old boy. The posse took them into custody and learned from these captives that a boat commanded by a Dr. Bell was moored in one of the island sloughs and was "loaded with stolen goods to the amount of several hundred dollars."

The pirate hunters set out the next morning in search of Dr. Bell's boat. With the captive lad as a guide, they found it without difficulty and made a close approach before noting signs of life. A dog, on board the vessel, barked to rouse the captain and "he sprang out on the bow in his shirt." Because he recognized the boy, he probably mistook the party for friends and requested them to wait, for his "wife was not up". But they did not comply, for neither river etiquette nor the formalities of law made full dress a prerequisite for arrest. Neither did they present a warrant before Dr. Bell sensed danger and intuitively presented arms. "Without further invitation" Peck fired and Dr. Bell slumped to the deck. Bell's wife then started shooting at them from within the cabin, so the assailing party deemed it prudent to return to McGregor for a force sufficient to capture the boat and to bring it into port.

Upon their return to McGregor "the town was



soon at boiling heat." About fifty men, "armed with such weapons as could be conveniently obtained enlisted for the war." Captain Nelson of the *Alexander McGregor* was induced to run his boat "down to the battle-ground". When they arrived, no one on Bell's vessel offered resistance "but the bird had flown." Only Mrs. Bell and her young child remained on board. A guard was detailed to remain in charge while further search of Big Island was made. Two more boats "loaded with plunder" were found. One of them was promptly towed to Clayton City by a Junction Ferry Line boat, while the *Pembina* from St. Louis volunteered to take the other prize to McGregor. The *Alexander McGregor* brought Bell's pirate ship to the same place.

Since the next day was Sunday, Captain Nelson's boat, "with two or three hundred citizens on board," started for Clayton City to bring the pirate craft to McGregor. On its way it met the *Fred Lorenz* "with the booty in tow, and such a time of cheering and rejoicing was never before heard on the Mississippi," the *Times* reported.

At McGregor the prize vessels were taken into custody by the Clayton County sheriff. The loot on board was worth "not less than from \$4,000 to \$5,000," showing "the industry of the robbers". The booty included dry goods, boots, shoes,



books, drugs, clothing, household goods, liquor, groceries, stoves, grindstones, and "every conceivable article" that could "tempt the cupidity of a thief."

Dr. Bell was not apprehended, although several posses were organized to scour neighboring regions in Wisconsin and Iowa. However, a man fitting his description: "Well made . . . about 35 years old, weighs 160, sandy complexion, large red whiskers" stopped at Wyalusing to have a physician "take a ball out of his head." Eighteen persons were arrested, and "as the rope is applied to the necks of some as a persuader, they are telling all they know with great liberality," the *North Iowa Times* reported. Among those implicated was John C. Bishop, "the Osage land robber". Captives revealed that two weeks previously Bishop had sent a booty boat "containing \$10,000 worth of goods" to St. Louis. Indeed, the *Times* "feared that many men heretofore regarded as honest will be found deeply implicated in this astonishing villainy." It was "hoped" that the aggressive action already taken by officers and citizen vigilantes would "result in breaking up one of the most formidable bands of robbers ever organized in the West."

THOMAS E. TWEITO